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Authors

Sosa, Felix Anthony
Gershman, Samuel
Ullman, Tomer

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Combining mental simulation and abstract reasoning explains people's reaction time in an intuitive physics task

Felix Sosa

Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts, United States

Samuel Gershman

Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts, United States

Tomer Ullman

Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts, United States

Abstract

How do people reason intuitively about everyday physical events? Two broad camps provide very different answers to this question. The first camp emphasizes mental simulations: when people predict where a bouncing ball will end up, they run a mental process that roughly approximates the motion of the ball. The second camp emphasizes rules and abstractions: when reasoning about the bouncing ball, people may reason 'the ball and table are solid, the ball can't go through the table'. Here we bring the two views together, with a model of physical reasoning that combines mental simulation and abstraction. We show behavioral signatures of both rule-usage and mental simulation in a response-time study in which participants reason about the trajectory of a ball. We present a novel model that can account for these signatures, and compare it to current models of physical reasoning that cannot.